

RETHINKING EL SALVADOR'S PUBLIC TRANSIT TROUBLE

Riding a public bus in the Central American country can be a treacherous and even deadly experience. But a local think tank is using its newfound ability to conduct detailed on-the-ground research to help transform a system relied upon by millions.

POSTED BY ALANNA MITCHELL ON JULY 19, 2017

Public transit buses in El Salvador often feature pictures of women in skimpy outfits, loud and sexually explicit music, disco lights, missing seats, lots of unscheduled stops and a lack of bells to signal regular stops on the route.

Bus shelters, far from being sheltering, are often ill-lit, graffiti-covered, strewn with litter, crowded and overrun with beggars and street hawkers.

It means that taking the bus in El Salvador is an unpleasant experience. But sometimes it's dangerous, too. A fifth of thefts and other crimes in El Salvador happen on buses. Nearly half of the nation's crimes involving a knife or handgun happen at a bus stop. Over the five years ending in 2013, there were 715 murders on transit buses.

But what if you need to ride the bus to get to work? And what if a national goal is to encourage women, the most vulnerable group of bus riders, to be part of the workforce? The public policy research group FUSADES (Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development) decided to dig more deeply into the problem.

And that meant conducting focus groups with riders, drivers, bus owners and police, plus taking the time to observe what was happening when riders arrived at a station and when they boarded, as well as when they were on the bus.

That's where the International Development Research Centre came in. In 2008, the IDRC, along with five other donors, launched a program to help research institutes around the world build their capacity to conduct high-calibre studies. One of the aims of the program was not only to make evidence-based research stronger, but also to give researchers the expertise to conduct academic studies rigorous enough to be published in peer-reviewed journals. To do that, the program guaranteed funding for a decade. Today the \$200-million program, now known as the [Think Tank Initiative](#), supports 43 research institutes in 20 countries, including FUSADES.

The improvement in FUSADES's capacity to conduct research has been striking, says Antonio Romero, a Uruguay-based senior program officer with the Think Tank Initiative, which IDRC manages on behalf of the donors. FUSADES has enthusiastically embraced new ideas and ways of conducting research and sent staff to participate in international meetings, as well as taking the time to reorganize itself to make research a higher priority.

So by the time it came to analysing the problems in El Salvador's bus system, FUSADES was ready. Working with two internationally famous criminologists, Mangai Natarajan of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York and Ronald Clarke of Rutgers School of Criminal Justice in New Jersey, the team devised a study that could stand up to peer review.



Researchers in El Salvador are investigating how to make riding the country's notorious public transit buses a safer experience. (Photo: Óscar Gómez, Communications Executive (FUSADES))

The public perception is that Salvadoran gang members are responsible for crime on the buses, says Margarita Beneke de Sanfeliú, director of FUSADES's centre for research and statistics. A civil war in the country from 1980 to 1992 and the deportation of thousands of gang members back to El Salvador from the United States during the 1990s had spawned a country with one of the highest murder rates in the world.

But it turned out that gangs and theft were not the main concern. Instead, the team discovered that every single woman interviewed, no matter what her age, had experienced some form of sexual harassment on the bus. "It was very, very shocking to us," says Beneke de Sanfeliú.

A key was the atmosphere on the buses, where drivers blasted disco music and posted racy images of women. They considered harassment of women normal.

When the researchers assessed regulations that could help make the buses safer, they found that most of them were already on the books. It's just that they weren't being enforced.

The FUSADES team has published its [study](#) in the journal *Crime Science* and presented the findings to El Salvador's Ministry of Labour and to a group of women leaders in the private sector, Beneke de Sanfeliú says. Already, bus-stop advertising signs, which once were positioned to hide potential assailants, have been redesigned to provide clear sight lines, one small improvement that the study may have helped foster.

But Beneke de Sanfeliú believes there's more to do than simply redesigning signs. "It will take time," she says. "We have to change cultural norms."

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READING AS THINKING

Answer the following in complete sentences.

1. Before reading the article, read its title, look at the accompanying picture and read its caption. Complete the following table:

Who do you think the article is about?	
What do you think is the issue?	
Where do you think the issue is occurring?	
When do you think the issue is happening?	
Why do you think the issue is occurring?	
How do you think the issue will be addressed?	

After reading the article, answer the following questions.

2. Make a list of all the issues with the buses themselves and explain why they are problematic.

ISSUE	WHY?

3. Out of 50 thefts and other crimes in El Salvador, how many of them will happen on buses?

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4. Why do you think that women are the most vulnerable group of bus riders in El Salvador? Justify your answer.

5. How can being published in peer-reviewed journals help effect change? Use the case of FUSADES to illustrate the importance.

6. Did the public perception that Salvadoran gang members were responsible for crime on buses end up being accurate? Explain

7. What did FUSADES find regarding crime on the buses?

8. In the article, Beneke de Sanfeliú says that they will have to change cultural norms to solve the problem. How could they go about doing so?

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Think-Pair-Share

9. *Think*

FUSADES conducted focus groups to dig more deeply into the problem. From different perspectives, explain the concerns of the groups listed below regarding riding a public bus in El Salvador.

	CONCERNS	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
RIDERS		
DRIVERS		
BUS OWNERS		
POLICE		
OTHER		

10. *Pair*

Compare your answers with a partner. Discuss some solutions to address the concerns. What role would each stakeholder play?

11. *Share*

As a class, share your concerns from each perspective and develop roles for each stakeholder to make riding the bus safer for all.

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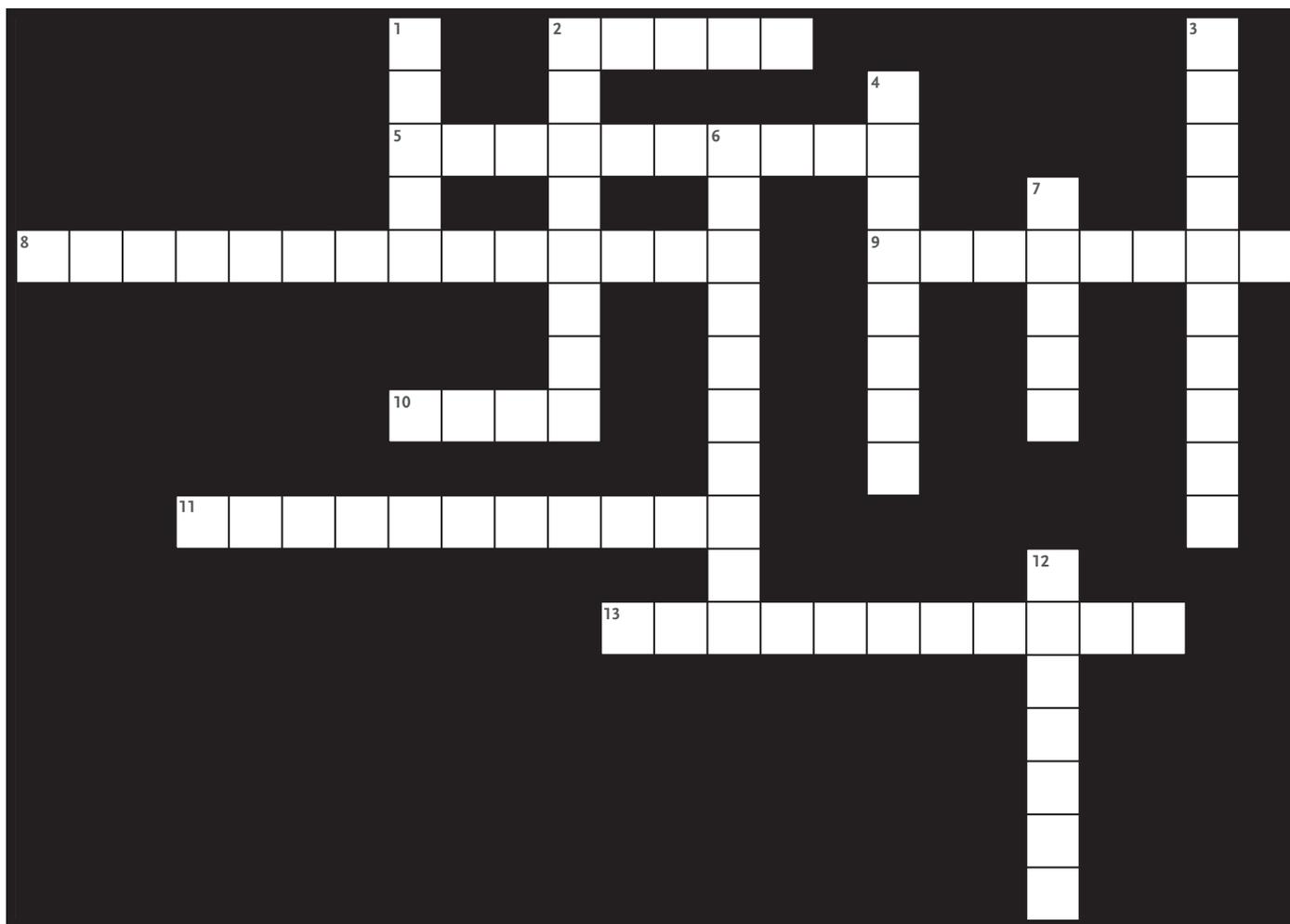
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ONLINE

1. Using [Google Maps](#), locate El Salvador and explore the country by using Street View and the satellite and map modes. Using the quick facts section and other research tools, find the following:
 - a. The population
 - b. The capital city
 - c. The neighbouring countries
 - d. The major bodies of water
 - e. A few bus stops
2. Read the [study](#) published in the journal Crime Science. Share five points that you find surprising from the study.
3. Watch the different [bus vendors in El Salvador](#).
4. Read more about [FUSADES](#) efforts to prevent crime on public transit.
5. Learn about the research done by criminologist [Mangai Natarajan](#) of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York and [Ronald Clarke](#) of Rutgers School of Criminal Justice in New Jersey.
6. Learn more about what [criminology](#) is.

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CROSSWORD:

Across

2. This type of group comprised riders, drivers, bus owners and police
5. Susceptible to being targeted
8. Mangai Natarajan and Ronald Clarke are these
9. The researchers found that the regulations weren't this
10. Objectives
11. Expulsion
13. The buses in El Salvador make a lot of stops that are of this nature

Down

1. Domestic
2. Results
3. View
4. The Think Tank Initiative supports 43 institutes of this type
6. Aggressors
7. Beneke de Sanfeliú believes that these need to change in order to solve the problem
12. Lacking light